

DEEP SPRINGS
DEEP SPRINGS COLLEGE, CALIFORNIA
Founded 1917

David Neidorf, *President*

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Friends and Colleagues,

Over the last 48 hours, institutional thinking about responding to COVID-19 in the United States has changed rapidly. Dozens of colleges have taken the opportunity offered by spring break to suspend classes, require students to move out of their dormitories, and even close their campuses. Deep Springs is in a different situation than most, but that doesn't necessarily mean that we should not apply some of the same measures. What it does mean is that we should discuss what's being done generally, and decide to what extent it should or should not apply to us.

This is going to be a long message, because there are a lot of items to cover, and some of them will require some background. For the same reason, this won't be the last such message.

Despite this message's length, please read it through carefully, take some time to let your thoughts settle, and then read it again. Everyone has a strong response to an indefinite threat like COVID-19; some people get anxious, some grow more laid back and detached, some throw themselves into research, some look for culprits to blame or suspect, some get pre-emptively mad at health authorities telling them what to do, some seek procedures to assert more control, some lose interest in control. The entire range of different individual responses is deeply authentic, entirely understandable, and hence completely legitimate. What's not legitimate is to act on those responses without taking the time to consider them carefully.

One truism about modern life is that what most cultures have always considered matters of fate or providence are for us instinctively framed as matters of risk and risk assessment—to be brought under control, as it were, by rational calculation rather than assigned to a divine power in whom faith assumes an ultimate goodness even though the reasons for present travails remain inscrutable. I think that overall, a lot of good can come from this modern turn, but it comes sometimes at the price of feeling existentially stranded, of feeling forced to ignore the very human experience of the possibility of death and loss which eludes, always, rational control. This is an educational institution, so I hope that we don't neglect this larger aspect of our experience—I hope that together we can pay our respects to these broader aspects of our experience by discussing them. But it's not a binary choice; we have at the same time to estimate risk and make plans, and that's the focus of this present message.

Who decides? At most colleges, a small group of administrators and the board's executive committee consult experts and decide on the college's response, and then present it to their employees and students. At Deep Springs, it would violate the spirit and practice of our community to impose things on the community without discussion and consultation, and my aim here is to provide the background for that discussion. But as a matter of legality and common sense, there's no need for us all to agree—and in fact, given the indefinite character of available information, I can't imagine that all of us will agree. In the final analysis, any policy changes we recommend must be approved by the board, and the board has the power to impose others without our consent. A lot of the time board membership is tedious and

routine, but this month, it's a significant and sharp responsibility. But I know that the board has no desire to act without widespread consultation and recommendations. It's too bad that they can't do this in person at the scheduled TDS meeting, but there are some decisions (see below) that we will need to make sooner.

This is a process, not an event. The information we need is confused and as yet uncertain, and there are more things to be discussed than can be loaded into one letter or one meeting. The most pressing question is whether or not to follow national trends and impose some form of restriction on who can be in the valley. We need to discuss this throughout the day on Thursday, so that if possible we can settle it before many community members will be traveling on Friday. That's the goal.

To that end, I'm going to lay out a range of options for consideration. But first, two kinds of preliminaries: subsidiary questions, and the basic rationale for the more drastic measures other colleges are taking to slow the rate of virus transmission.

The first preliminary is identifying that set of subsidiary questions we will need to decide as a community over the next few weeks, but that can be queued up for later in the discussion process. This includes things like:

- Details of the expanded hygienic practices we commit to here over the duration of the pandemic.
- What expectations for behavior in shared living spaces we will want to live by.
- How we would enforce hygiene procedures if they are circumvented.
- Whether or not to limit access to food supplies.
- Whether to serve plated food instead of providing infection pathways through shared serving utensils.
- How we would receive food and mail deliveries if we close the campus to outside contact for a period of time.
- What markers of failure would we look for that would set off the next level of response.
- How we would support students who cannot easily return home should we decide to suspend operations here.

...and so forth. I'm sure many of you have questions, opinions, and worries about these things, and we will discuss them together in due course. But to make space for the entry-level questions I'm going to frame here, we need to set them aside for later.

Before setting them aside, however, let me identify a few items that seem to me obvious, or at least very likely. Some may be modified over time, but knowing these likelihoods now may alleviate some worries. For the time being, I propose we assume that:

- We will work to maintain as much respect as possible for individual autonomy. We might decide to ask some people to avoid the valley, for example, but we won't require anyone to stay, and won't penalize them for whatever decision they make.
- We will maintain compassion for those who bear the brunt of any changes made. If a class is cancelled, we will find some way to make it up. If a term is cancelled, students can return when

safe to do so without reapplication, etc. No salaries will be disrupted, no staff members turned out of their primary residence.

- We will put together an expanded set of hygiene practices, both to specify the set of “social distancing” procedures recommended nationally, and to apply their principles to food preparation and communal spaces.
- We will review the health insurance information of all Deep Springs residents, to ensure that everyone here has current financial access to life-saving care if needed.
- We will compile a list of people in the valley who fall into one of the recognized high-risk categories, and consider case by case, with the help of medical advice, whether or not it is dangerous for them to remain in an area with limited medical capacity for advanced care.
- Staff members for whom Deep Springs is their primary residence will not be excluded or subjected, at this time, to restrictions on activity in their private homes. To what extent this applies to students for whom Deep Springs is their legal place of residence would have to be worked out individually in the event it comes up.

We should make these assumptions for now, so that we can consider more pressing issues without becoming distracted by such details at this point.

The second preliminary is a general understanding of what other colleges are doing and why. Just this morning a lot of them announced that students will be required to leave campus except in cases of hardship. Most are trying to establish some way to continue instruction online. You can read a [partial list from Wednesday morning here](#). By Thursday morning, the list will have multiplied, I can't resist saying, like a virus. The leading edge of closures is from elite colleges, since greater wealth makes the hardships easier to bear. The closures are spreading, however, to [public community colleges as well](#).

It's useful to remember that the closures are not quarantines. They are not aimed at preventing the spread of the virus. Every expert I have read considers it inevitable that most of the U.S. population who can contract the virus will get it over the next year and a half. The purpose of the closures is to slow the spread of the virus, so as to reduce its peak impact on the healthcare system (i.e. to flatten the infection curve over time). If this isn't a familiar idea to you, there's a good layperson's [explanation of it here](#). Please take the time to make sure you understand it, because otherwise you may think that if we will all be exposed eventually, and young people are unlikely to die from it, there's little point in measures to slow the spread.

How does slowing the spread effort apply to Deep Springs? For a large college, sending students home to help flatten the curve is good citizenship in the overall effort to deal with the pandemic. Because we are so small, our effort isn't of much overall significance; Physicians advise that our small size and relative isolation give some degree of protection, and they make it impossible for us to help flatten the curve.

There is no doubt that both liability concerns and an abundance of caution also motivate campus closings. If a significant number of students do become ill, it could easily become beyond our capacities to care for them—just imagine 60% of the SB and staffulty in bed with a severe flu for 2-3 weeks, and then someone gets critically ill. Allowing students to remain on campus incurs ethical

responsibility for such a scenario, just as asking them to leave here incurs responsibility if they return to a part of the country with a more virulent infection rate.

But while isolation is protective, a college dormitory has other dangers. One doctor I spoke with today said that in basic epidemiology, the big four classic incubators for epidemics are prisons, nursing homes, military barracks, and college dormitories; all places where people live in close quarters and with distorted degrees of either fatalism or over-confidence in their immunity from disaster, and therefore likely to cut corners on precautions. Accordingly, while it's not possible to know for sure, it's possible that a student living in the Deep Springs dorm is more likely to be infected in any given time period than he or she would be if they stayed at home.

How serious a mortality risk is it, really, that we would be letting our students take on by returning? Is it greater than the ever-present risk of a death from food-borne illness, or an accident with machinery or large animals? It's impossible, at this point, to say. [Early studies](#) suggest that people in their 20s seem to come down with the infection at a lower rate than older people, but these numbers are preliminary, and most people expect them to rise as better data becomes available. But to estimate the risk, we'd need to know (a) what percentage of infected people in their 20s require hospitalization—and no one I've consulted can locate good data on this yet, although it will probably be better in a week's time, and (b) what the likelihood is of such students having access to advanced health care in our local area.

In this last respect, we again can't know for sure, but we can consider the local area more closely. When a COVID-19 infection becomes severe, the patient needs breathing support and frequently a ventilator. Although there are no cases so far in the Owens Valley, there are remarkably few intensive care beds and ventilators available in less than four hour's driving time. I'm told that if the virus spreads as some models predict, it's quite possible that Inyo and Mono county health services will be overwhelmed. This means that when the pandemic does come to the area, it is quite possible--no one can really predict this with any certainty yet--that life support systems like ventilators for critical patients will be in short supply, rationed, or even unavailable. Together with virtually inevitable increased transmission rates on campuses, this fact increases the risk--to some unspecifiable extent—for students who remain at Deep Springs as the COVID-19 virus spreads.

Here are a few additional pieces of site-specific advice I picked up from the experts I've spoken with:

- At the very least, we should evaluate returning students for symptoms on their return, and quarantine them if they have any. (Currently there are only 7 students on campus; the other 21 are slated to return over the weekend, from places like Portland, Hawai'i, India, Peru, Germany, New York, Los Angeles, the Bay Area, and Washington DC.) We should certainly require social distancing.
- If we follow what's increasingly a national practice by asking students not to return, the postponement of their residence is indefinite, since the pandemic is going to become worse.
- If students are going to return, they should return as soon as possible, and be prepared for health authorities to recommend that they don't leave—i.e. they might be stuck here, so

long as they didn't defy the advice of the health authorities, who may ban in-country travel at some point.

- It is probably reasonable and prudent to ban visits from outsiders into the valley for the time being (with the likely exception of those remaining inside private homes).

The Near-Term Agenda: After all this, what are the pressing decisions to be made? We should make sure to discuss on Thursday, to the extent that we can while spread out so in so many places, the following possibilities--with the aim, if possible, of making recommendations to the board:

1. Students not currently on campus are welcomed back, screened for symptoms of infection, and stringent social distancing (details to follow) is practiced.
2. Students not currently on campus are asked to postpone their return for one week, so as to provide more time for arriving at a long-term plan.
3. Students not currently on campus are asked to stay away indefinitely, (those with special circumstances excepted), and students currently in residence are asked to make arrangements to leave campus as soon as possible.
4. Starting this weekend, outside visitors should be gently asked to stay away.
5. We take no actions outside of our ordinary routines.

But how can we have this discussion? It's going to be awkward, and anything we decide will be subject to revision as better information comes available and our thinking ripens. At so late a date, there's no way to find a time when everyone can participate together. Here is what we plan to do tomorrow (Thursday, March 12):

- A. If you have thoughts to share, please respond with reply-all to the email thread that conveys this letter, so we can have an email discussion throughout the day on Thursday. Any eventual conclusions will also be posted to this thread.
- B. We will set two times when people can call into a conference call if they like, for in person discussions: 1:00 pm PDT, and 6:30 pm PDT. I will supply the call-in number on Thursday morning by noting it in the email thread. Board members, as well as current students and community members, are encouraged to participate.
- C. Those present for the evening call will aim to adopt one or more of the five alternatives given above as recommendations to TDS, or possibly an alternative recommendations that's worked out during the day's discussions.

In conclusion, note that everything I've said here may need to be revised as we learn more about the pandemic. I realize that merely the length of this letter may feel somewhat overwhelming to some, but I want to assure you that we will find our way through this passage in our collective lives. It's a classic and familiar problem of practical judgment, from political leadership to considering a marriage or choosing a transfer college; the stakes are high, expert opinion vague or contradictory, we don't know anything for sure, and yet we have to make judgments. In such cases it's always best to talk things through with others.

I know, too, that even contemplating a postponement of next term's residence, much less having the board require it, must feel awful to some students, for whom Deep Springs is starting to feel like a home, and for some the place where the most essential or formative human relationships are happening. I can tell you for sure that so long as you're alive 10 years from now, it won't matter all that much to you where you spent March or April of 2020. But I also know that for some of you it matters a whole lot right now. It's even harder to face that possible loss when you may be worried at the same time about the safety of your family or friends elsewhere. As I write this, I can hear the coyotes south of the Main Circle howling to us all with greater than usual poignancy. I know we will spend the next few days having unsatisfying and halting discussions, enact conclusions that are temporary and uncomfortable, feel like it's all impossibly impossible, and yet get through it all. Just hang in there.

Many thanks,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'DN', written in dark ink.

David